Book review

Todd Decker, *Astaire By Numbers: Time and the Straight White Male Dancer*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2022).

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23,690 seconds across 932 shots, connected by 778 cuts, making up 324 musical numbers, covering 35,500 feet of film— "by Hollywood standards a genuine epic." Musicologist Todd Decker's *Astaire By Numbers: Time and the Straight White Male Dancer* reconceptualizes Fred Astaire through this singularly meticulous approach to the artist's body of work. Setting aside familiar images of his fleet-footed ease or romantic charm, the book introduces Astaire not simply as dancer but as choreographer, producer, and special effects creator—one who, as a straight white man, exercised unique control over the making of his "screen dance body." Employing digital humanities methods, Decker offers a new perspective on a dancer often defined by his "genius" and "consummate ease." The book's comprehensive accounting of shots, sounds, and composition limns the technical allowances and constraints that shaped the production of Astaire's image; as such, it works to quite literally measure, rather than take for granted, the qualities of "white male 'genius'" as captured on camera.

Decker's quantitative approach is exceptionally thorough: he accounts for all 23,690 of Astaire's filmed dances in "countable units." These include shots, cuts, camera movements and frames, types of dance and non-dance actions, number of participants in a dance, and presence (or lack) of foot and body sounds. This multitude of data points informs Decker's close readings of particular dance scenes, and provides material for graphs and tables throughout the text as well as three detailed appendixes. The purpose of this rigorous documentation is to propel Decker's analysis of Astaire's career "beyond preconceptions or clichés" that animate a certain aura of effortlessness. Indeed, Decker argues, "It is disingenuous to call Astaire's dancing simply dancing." Rather, it is the assiduously assembled product of specific choreographic, filmmaking, and editing strategies. A digital humanities approach to Astaire's screen dance body, Decker contends, "force[s] the viewer to slow down," to "see both production and spectacle."

As the book's title suggests, Decker is also attentive to how Astaire performed race and masculinity via these strategies, and how his white heterosexual maleness was vital to his success on screen. Without those qualities, "his career would have been impossible"—in particular, the authority he had over his presentation as a performer, from his self-choreographing to his use of Black expressive forms like jazz and tap to his hours spent in post-production. Rather than take these forms of privilege as a given, Decker is interested in how Astaire curated his image "with intention, care, and close attention to the dangerous edges of these identity categories," such that "his negotiation of the edges of whiteness, straightness, and maleness proves as important as his definition of a refined and idealized version of each category." He locates Astaire within the "fraught category" of "being a 'man' who sings and dances," and thus potentially undermines his own masculinity. Simply put, then, "how exactly did this particular cis-het white man get away with dancing"? It was precisely the illusion of ease that Astaire's choreography and cinematography conspire to sustain, Decker argues, that enabled him to walk that line. Drawing on everyday rather than "trained" gestures, as well as methods of framing his dancing body so that it appeared to be a "fully disclosed object"— "There is apparently no mystery here"—contributed to a dance style that managed to simultaneously look virtuosic and "like nothing."

The International Journal of Screendance 14 (2024) https://doi.org/10.18061/ijsd.v14i1.9621

Each chapter elaborates on a different unit of measurement and the part it played in crafting Astaire's screen dance body. Chapter 1, "Numbers," offers an overview of how Decker approached the 324 musical numbers in Astaire's corpus, and how he came to his categories of quantification. The next chapter, "Shots," categorizes and analyzes the 932 shots in that corpus, arguing that while the presentation of Astaire's dancing body is "ostensibly" done in as "direct a fashion as possible," its apparent continuity actually "carries its own ideology." In particular, his frequent use of "Vitruvian" framing—which places the entirety of the dancing body at the center of the frame—is "a nuanced cinematic creation, far from a camera simply recording a dance done in front of it." Indeed, Decker argues, it is a *racial* cut, presenting the white dancing body as "whole, centered, a (male) agent around which space accrues, a unified subject in control of self and the world." Chapter 3, "Days, Hours, Minutes," looks to production notes that reveal Astaire as studio employee, and asks how metrics like length of workdays and shooting efficiency inflect our understanding of the screen dances his creative team produced. A short interlude, "I Just / Won't / [Don't?] Dance," probes the idiosyncrasies of Astaire's so-called "outlaw" movement style. Decker continually emphasizes how the qualities of Astaire's unaffected, walk-like dancing "demand examination as themselves expressions of his straight white male identity."

Chapter 4, "Frames, Sets, Cuts" continues to explore the mutual imbrication of choreography and cinematography. The camera frame, Decker observes, "acted as a third partner in all duo dances"; such "triangulations" were crucial to Astaire's screen dancing. This chapter leads into "Partners," which examines the bulk of Astaire's dances (78%) that he shared with other dancers, a majority of those (59%) with female romantic partners. Decker carefully counts instances of physical touch and types of relationships between dancers, while also attending to outliers, such as Astaire's partnerings with other men. In the sixth and final chapter, "Noisy Masculinity," he analyzes a class of Astaire dance moves that "mark a strain of demonstration rather than assumption of masculinity." These are designated "noisy" because they often rely on the "potential of the body to make noise," particularly through tap dancing, which required many "dedicated hours" on Astaire's part to the production and layering of foot sounds in addition to dancing itself.

All in all, these efforts—as exposed through Decker's meticulous quantitative analysis—remind us that Astaire's screen dance body is "always the result of collective labor." Digital humanities methods, then, advance rich possibilities for parsing the concrete qualities of (white, male) artistry, and exposing the dominant social categories that are mobilized in their making.

Biography

Crystal is a dancer and PhD candidate in Performance Studies at the University of California, Berkeley. Her dissertation explores Asian American competitive ballroom dance cultures, with a focus on how model minorityness is negotiated and reorganized through embodied practice. Her work has been published in *TDR, Conversations Across the Field of Dance Studies*, and *The Black Scholar*. In addition to her research and practice, she serves as co-coordinator of Five Borough Ballroom, an organization dedicated to community-powered ballroom dance in the Greater New York area.